



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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MAUNDY THURSDAY

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy:  
When Memory Becomes Meaning  
Exodus 12:1-14; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Last Sunday morning we talked about what we remember and what we forget—sometimes intentionally. This night is another occasion when memory is so important, in fact it is so important that it is the focus of everything that Jesus did on this night. Tonight we revisit the Passover meal Jesus shared with his closest disciples. It proved to be the last supper they would share together before his crucifixion. The night was and is all about memory.

The Passover meal itself is about remembering what God did for the Hebrew people. As we heard earlier, when God had lost his patience with Pharaoh after multiple broken promises to set the Hebrews free, God proceeded to liberate the Hebrews on his own. He instructed them in their preparation for their escape from Egypt, gave them the menu for a quick meal on the go, and told them how to pack and what to do. He also instructed them to remember that night and to revisit it every year so that they would never forget God's deliverance of his people.

Beginning with that event thousands of years ago, and every year since, Jews throughout the world have gather to celebrate Passover and to remember God's mercy. Each aspect of the meal is a reminder of the hardship, the suffering, and the freedom the Hebrews experienced. In another month, on April 22, Jews will continue the Passover tradition as they have done for thousands of years. Jesus and his closest friends participated in this tradition and gathered in an upstairs room to remember.

Jesus realized that it was time to offer his followers a final lesson. After they had settled into their places around the table, he got up, took off his robe, and wrapped a towel around himself. He moved from one disciple to another, kneeling in front of each one, leaning in to wash their feet, an act of simple hospitality.

Except that it wasn't—not completely. It was common hospitality to have one's feet washed after entering a house. The roads were dusty and sandals were the order of the day. Cleansing one's feet with cool water was

refreshing in many ways. Jesus' disciples already knew that it was an important tradition for Jesus. At least once—perhaps several times—they had witnessed a woman wash Jesus' feet, anoint them with expensive perfume, and dry them with her hair. Beyond hospitality, it was an act of love and devotion.

When he finished washing the disciples' feet, Jesus put on his robe again and sat down at the table. He pointed out to his disciples what they were already thinking and what he and Peter had skirmished about: rarely, if ever, would someone with the status of a rabbi, a teacher, wash the feet of his disciples. That job was reserved for a servant. In washing their feet, however, he had served them. Their leader, their Lord, their Messiah had washed their feet, becoming a servant to each of them. "Remember," he advised them, "because you are supposed to be servants, too."

There are other important elements of the story that we need to remember: the bread which represents Jesus' body broken for us, the wine which recalls his sacrifice for us, the agony of Gethsemane which demonstrates his humanity in our midst, the trumped up charges and mock trial which remind us of how the world considers the Gospel to be foolishness. There are so many important things to remember in these days before Easter.

But I cannot forget the washing of feet. There is something more to that act than getting rid of dust and sweat. It is more than refreshment and courtesy. The women who anointed Jesus' feet did so as an act of gratitude for mercy and as preparation for his impending burial. What was it to mean for the disciples . . . and for us?

That is the point! The act itself carries great meaning. We remember so many things that have happened to us—good things, bad things, happy things, sad things, insignificant things, life changing things. What matters, however, is when those memories take on meaning for us. If a personal experience is nothing more than a notation in the journal of our lives, it has little meaning. It simply happened. When it takes on meaning, however, it changes us. It defines who we are and what we are about in the world. It shapes the world around us. Let me offer an example.

A couple of weeks ago there was a StoryCorps feature on NPR. This particular story featured someone you would probably never recognize by name but would know by sight. His name is Francois Clemmons and he played Officer Clemmons on *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, featuring Fred

Rogers. The two men first met when Fred Rogers heard Mr. Clemmons sing in a church choir. He approached him with the idea of playing a police officer on the show. Francois Clemmons balked, however. He had grown up in a tough ghetto neighborhood. His experience with policemen had never been positive. He saw policemen, not as helpers, but as authorities who sicced dogs on people and sprayed them with water cannons. Francois Clemmons is also African American. Fred Rogers persisted. Francois joined the program and played the role for twenty-five years. Out of the thousands of episodes they did together, he recalled one in particular which has always stood out above all others.

It was from an episode that aired in 1969, in which Rogers had been resting his feet in a plastic pool on a hot day.

"He invited me to come over and to rest my feet in the water with him," Clemmons recalls. "The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet."<sup>1</sup>

I was eleven years old when that program aired. I did not see it at the time, but I do know that relationships between Blacks and Whites were tenuous at best. In my hometown, school integration was about to take place. There were many tensions, many questions, many suspicions about what would happen when Blacks and Whites entwined their lives.

I am sorry to say that the experiment in my hometown did not go smoothly. There were unkind things said by each race against the other. Fights broke out in school. Mistrust and mythology were often the rule of the day. How ironic that we were able to figure out how to put men on the moon, but we could not figure out how to live peacefully together here on earth. Even today, forty-seven years later, we still struggle with racism. Only now, we have added more races to the formula and thrown in unfamiliar religions for good measure.

What Fred Rogers did in that episode was simple but revolutionary. All he did was remember. Keep in mind that Mr. Rogers was himself a

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<sup>1</sup>NPR Staff, "Walking The Beat In Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Where A New Day Began Together," from StoryCorps, on *Morning Edition*, (March 11, 2016); available online at: <http://www.npr.org/2016/03/11/469846519/walking-the-beat-in-mr-rogers-neighborhood-where-a-new-day-began-together>.

Presbyterian minister. He knew these stories. He knew the things Jesus had asked us to remember. He knew about the Passover meal, the Last Supper, and the footwashing. Mr. Rogers remembered, and the story of that footwashing took on meaning for him. On a nationally televised program, he sat with his friend with their pants legs rolled up and their feet soaking in a little wading pool ordinarily reserved for children. At a time when Blacks and Whites dared not go swimming in the same pool, Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemmons dipped their feet in the same water. More than that, when they got up to put on their shoes again, Mr. Rogers leaned over and helped dry Officer Clemmons' feet. Any Christian watching should have felt a memory stir for he was doing exactly what Jesus did and what Jesus told us to do: serve one another. The fact that it was a well-known, well-respected, successful White man who was serving a Black man made the experience all the more meaningful.

On that day, the memory of what Jesus did took on new meaning as Mr. Rogers assumed the role of servant to his friend. It was a bold statement to the world about relationships and roles. If only we had paid attention! If only we had remembered!

“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus said, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Tonight Jesus asks us to remember, not merely for sentimental reasons, but in order that these memories might take on meaning so that we will change the world into the Kingdom of God. Jesus invites us to lean into the heart of the Holy, which is a servant's heart. When we lean into the Holy, we lean toward one another. That is, after all, why Jesus came. That is why we remember.

When memories take on meaning, we change and so does the world around us. Just ask Jesus and his disciples—and Francois Clemmons. Amen.